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Going Global: How Bham execs are tapping into Sister Cities program

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On paper, the cities of Hitachi, Japan; Plzen, Czech Republic; Liverpool, England; and Kingston, Jamaica; represent an eclectic mix of places from around the globe.

But they do have one common thread: Birmingham.

Each of those places are Sister Cities with Birmingham through Sister Cities International – a nonprofit that unites tens of thousands of citizen diplomats and volunteers in nearly 500 member communities with over 2,000 partnerships in more than 140 countries.

While some aspects of the program are more social or cultural in nature and focus on encouraging positive international relations, a number of Birmingham businesses have utilized relationships built through the Sister Cities program to grow their businesses and expand internationally.

At a time when Alabama continues to draw more international investments, a number of local entrepreneurs say the Sister Cities program can be an economic driver for Birmingham as the region seeks to elevate its status on the global stage.

And a few local companies offer a good roadmap to do just that.

The business connection

Tanveer Patel is no stranger to the world of global business.

But for Patel's ConcertCare, Birmingham's relationship with the city of Liverpool in the United Kingdom



IMAGE PROVIDED BY GETTY IMAGES (RAWPIXEL LTD)

Several local business leaders have used Birmingham's Sister Cities program to expand their businesses globally.

opened doors.

Her company opened a Liverpool office in 2015 and said the Sister Cities relationship played a role in that development.

“(Sister Cities) means access to global market and footprint. The best growth is through solid committed relationships at the government level. It also takes out an element of fear because you have an underlying infrastructure that supports you as an entrepreneur I call it a global ecosystem in which entrepreneurs can thrive,” Patel said.

Bettina Byrd-Giles, chair of the Birmingham Sister Cities Commission and CEO of the Bethesda Life Center Inc., said the program offers some clear benefits for businesses who are looking to do business globally.

“We are a local economy. If people want to expand their markets and expand them to international communities, then we have several cities that are willing and looking for Americans to make friendly plays to invest and to create relationships,” Byrd-Giles said.

“For international relationships, you have to court people and know who you are and know what you’re about, and Sister Cities has been building on these relationships for years. We’re part of an international entity that prepares cities and we meet together on an annual basis and have programs that we do together as an international entity and professional association.”

Scotty Colson, the state coordinator for Sister Cities who also serves as honorary consul for Ukraine to Alabama, said the program eases the step of making an entrance into a country. It gives entrepreneurs some built-in relationships and a framework to make additional connections.

But it also creates economic opportunities in Birmingham for international investments into the city.

Mark Jackson, the honorary consul general of Japan, CEO of Moreson Conferencing and chairman of Clarity Global Technologies, said there are several examples of Sister Cities relationships paying dividends in metro Birmingham.

“Right now, the city of Hitachi, one of the projects they are developing is the new artificial heart. (The developers) have asked for access into Birmingham,” he said.

That could create opportunities for local patent law firms, as well as connections and possibilities for UAB.

Jackson said many of the initial relationships gained through the Sister Cities relationships are starting to bear fruit.

There is also a push to make Birmingham a regional hub in the EB-5 visa program, which allows international investors to gain citizenship in the U.S. if they reach certain investment thresholds in the U.S. and create jobs for U.S. workers.

While that program does face some questions and potential reforms on Capitol Hill, Birmingham advocates say it could open the door for more startups and investments in the Magic City, which has already been experiencing a wave of foreign investments in recent years, particularly in the automotive realm.

Birmingham has Sister Cities relationships with cities in two of Alabama's largest trade partners – China (\$3.62 billion in exports) and Japan (\$682.6 million).

New horizons

In early June, Birmingham Mayor Randall Woodfin hosted a delegation from Kingston, Jamaica, one of Birmingham's newest sister cities.

Kingston is Jamaica's capital and has more than 1 million residents. The meeting led to talk of furthering the relationship between the two cities.

"Mayor Woodfin had a very good meeting with Mayor Williams. They discussed common issues and ideas," said Rick Journey, director of communications for the city. "Mayor Williams discussed plans to host a UAB delegation in July to discuss health care."

Journey said Williams discussed efforts to establish collaborative programs between UAB and the University of the West Indies.

Stephanie Hunter, chair of the Jamaica section of Birmingham Sister Cities, said there are many similarities between the two cities and a number of possible benefits.

That's especially true in the health and research fields, which are a strength of Birmingham.

"I would say (the relationship formed) was very positive. I would say every meeting that was had with the different groups was very productive," Hunter said.

"We definitely left with the doors wide open for the mayor of Kingston to return or for people to go to Jamaica and to follow up the conversation that was going on."

Hunter said Birmingham has an active Caribbean community, which makes exploring business relationships a logical step.

"The individuals from the Caribbean community are very plugged in to the city. They are business owners, they are leaders," she said. "(Becoming official Sister Cities) has made a good relationship better."

The Birmingham Association of Realtors also discussed working with Kingston due to formal connections with the country, according to Colson.

Jackson said the Jamaica delegation also met with the Birmingham Business Alliance. Research was a hot topic, and he said there could be further relationships involving UAB and Southern Research with entities in Jamaica.

He said the size of Kingston, relative to Birmingham, is also important from a business perspective.

"But for a city of a million which is the gateway to the Caribbean and North American to partner with a city like Birmingham gives Birmingham a lot of credibility," Jackson said.

Future funding

While advocates for Birmingham's Sister Cities program are excited about the possibilities, they have expressed concerns about future funding pipelines.

The city of Birmingham has traditionally provided the bulk of the funding for the organization.

Up to \$225,000 is included in the city's new budget for the program, and the organization will use a similar mechanism to obtain that funding to what REV Birmingham, the Birmingham Business Alliance and other organizations will do.

That process will include submitting a scope of services explaining how they will spend the money and a proposed budget.

That will be reviewed by the law department and a contract will be prepared before heading to the Birmingham City Council's finance committee and, ultimately, the full Council for approval.

In addition to that avenue, Jackson said the organization also can start looking for funding through grants at the state or federal level, or through other entities.

He said there are also opportunities to tap into Birmingham's corporate world to generate funding from the business community.

If the organization isn't able to secure funding from the city, Hunter said it could impact projects in the works and force Birmingham Sister Cities to scale back.

"The whole point (of Sister Cities) is people to people," Colson said. "It's seldom you do that on a large traditional deal, and it's important to have that connection, and one of the things the Sister Cities has been able to do is create that connection. Bottom line, at the end of the day, you want to know who you are doing business with."

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